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Models and Trends in Education Abroad

This is a curious profession in so far as we are simultaneously educators and administrators. In recent years we have become significantly more adept as administrators but we are also educationalists. In that context, we have remained largely static. The climate of study abroad is largely uncontested.

My intention here is to explore critically some of these current trends and issues:

1. The notions of immersion and integration in contrast to independent programmes in study abroad.
2. The development of programmes in non-traditional locations.
3. Notions of transformation.

This is somewhat of a kaleidoscope of issues that are connected only tenuously but they are collectively areas in which myth and misconception flourish.

1. Immersion/ integration and the free-standing models:

Over years colleagues have debated the relative merits of direct enrolment/immersion (where students enrol in a host university) over independent or semi-independent models (where students study in a context designed for them with a host institution/organisation).

The conventional wisdom is that programmes which integrate students fully into a host university are ideal; the degree to which students are integrated is seen as a measure of the quality of the programme. That said, in the education abroad environment we all wisely recognise that in foreign-language communities, these objectives are frequently unrealistic and unworkable. The need to mediate the student's experience abroad is conceived, in this argument, as an unfortunate but necessary transitional step on the road to the ultimate goal of full integration.

My intention here is to challenge that orthodoxy and to argue that, even where no language barrier exists, full immersion into another academic culture is not the only (or even the best) mechanism through which the benefits of education abroad may be maximised. The level of integration is an entirely inappropriate measure of quality. In practice, it may be more advisable to get a toe wet rather than to plunge into icy waters. Immersion may be baptism but it may also be drowning.

A student studying abroad needs to be guided towards examining the experience through analysis and retrospection. In most cases, this will involve some degree of separate programming. In a full immersion model there will be less space for distanced reflection. Ethnography, based on participation and observation, offers perhaps the most effective

model for investigation of another national environment. Participation requires engagement; observation requires distance and space for reflection which may be enhanced by peer learning within the study abroad group.

Furthermore, educational systems are not neutral; they reflect and, in some cases, create a national ethos. The function of a university is not a matter of global agreement. Learning methods may vary significantly across national cultures. The purpose of the university might, at one end of a theoretical spectrum, be metaphorically “theological”. The primary purpose of this institution is to purvey and protect some form of canonical truth. At the other end of this spectrum is what we might call the “liberal” model where the object is, at least to some degree, to offer alternative and conflicting narratives: to challenge the notion, ultimately, of “truth” itself.

“Liberal” learning methods invite dispute and debate. “Theological” learning models require students to learn from the professor who is the unchallenged authority. This may cause a number of issues: we are familiar with the US students who offend the host university by overtly challenging the professor’s view (a “liberal” learning mode in a “theological” environment). We are also familiar with the visiting student (from a “theological” learning environment) who is deeply disturbed by “liberal” learning and, challenged to challenge, subsides into bewildered silence. In that situation the visiting student anticipates sitting at the feet of the master and gaining insight into the holy grail of knowledge. Instead the “master” turns out to be a devil’s advocate, an agitator who

encourages and expects dispute. It is possible to mitigate these difficulties but they are potentially embedded in a direct enrolment model.

Furthermore, any national education system is designed primarily and properly to serve the interests of the home students. The curriculum is designed for home students and may or may not meet the needs of US students or the US University. In any case, the US University will have little or no say over course content. Opportunities for the formal study of the host culture will be very limited as will experiential education opportunities.

On another level, the US student enters an academic environment for a semester or a year. That environment is fully formed at the visiting student's point of entry. Friendships have been made, associations formed, cultures conceived. It is a folly to assume that the US student can penetrate these structures simply by being there. The culture they bring to the campus is most likely to be entirely familiar. Their engagement with the institution is, compared to the local student, limited both by time and commitment. In short, proximity does not create intimacy!

There are also strong intellectual reasons for arguing that a degree of separation is of benefit. The standard argument is that US students ought not to spend too much time together (as a group) because that undermines potential for integration with host communities and local students. This ignores the simple fact that significant learning operates within the group through discussion, social interaction, intellectual exchange etc. The participants learn a great deal about their home culture through the process of being US students abroad. It is clear that an integral factor in the learning experience is,

precisely, the capacity to envisage an image of America born out of, and modified by, experience overseas. This act of imagination and intellectual introspection, the re-perception of America, is a fundamental characteristic of a valuable learning experience abroad and can best be enhanced through peer exchange and group analysis.

One needs also to consider the ultimate purpose of study abroad. A core subject in any study abroad programme is, surely, “abroad” itself. What students should anticipate (and practitioners should create) is some study of the culture and society of the host country. Education abroad has implicitly another academic agenda from that of the host country. The “abroad” element imposes an obligation to offer the participant insights into among other matters: the culture of that country, the experience of the US student in that environment (what we learn about our own culture when we leave it), comparative social codes and so on. These topics will not form part of a curriculum designed predominantly for home students. It is the responsibility of study abroad professionals to ensure that at least some element of the programme addresses the fact that the students are from the USA and that fact creates some separate learning objectives.

Furthermore, if we remain committed to the objective of full immersion, we lose the opportunity to create radical, experiential programmes for US students overseas. Full integration, in this context, precludes innovation as the educational agendas of host universities are rightly driven by national priorities. An effective programme abroad will, for example, contain a significant element of experiential learning. In this sense it will need to “go beyond” the classroom in ways that would be inappropriate for courses taught to local students.

The real alternatives are not between integration and isolation. The actual experience of US students in European universities is rarely that of untroubled integration. The experience of US students on good independent programmes is rarely that of total isolation. Students integrated into a host university overseas are inevitably predominantly drawing their insights from a classroom-based experience which is, everywhere, a very familiar environment. In the independent programme, in contrast, the walls of the classroom can be exploded and the foreign landscape itself becomes the classroom. It may ultimately be possible to argue, in this context, that opportunities to penetrate the host culture are, paradoxically, greater.

2. Non-traditionalism

Let me move on to consider locations and the current enthusiasm for “non-traditional” locations which signifies anywhere but Europe!

The call to expand opportunities for study abroad students in “non-traditional” locations has become a kind of mantra. To a degree, this notion has become a new orthodoxy and there is a widespread commitment towards these perceived ideal objectives.

This vision is neither entirely realistic nor wholly desirable. It is built out of a misplaced and sometimes condescending enthusiasm for regions and nations constructed through US lenses as an “exotic” other. The whole becomes even more complex and suspect when, as is often the case, the non-traditional locations become melded with the developing world.

There are many problems associated with the objective of “non-traditionalism” and one of particular concern is that it defines study abroad too readily in language that combines the travel agent’s attraction to the exotic with a quasi-missionary zeal to engage with poverty: “a trip”, motivated, at worst, by a kind of voyeurism in which privileged young Americans go to observe relative poverty in a developing country

There could, of course, be many valid reasons to encourage study abroad in non-traditional locations. A significant expansion of minority language study would lead, rationally and reasonably to the expansion of study abroad in relevant locations. Has that expansion taken place? Is there a marked growth in African Studies in the USA that would stimulate the need to develop more programmes on that continent? The evidence is otherwise. If there were a more credible rationale beyond “exoticism” it would be reflected in a growth of domestic programmes relevant to non-traditional locations e.g. Asian languages, African Studies, African languages. The reality is different. The fields of development studies, conflict and resolution (and so on) are arguably met within existing provision. The call for expansion is not being driven by an academic agenda.

Furthermore, what does this new emphasis imply to students who, with probably more academic rationale, choose to study in Western Europe? It implicitly sends a signal that their experiences are, to some degree, less valid, less “exciting”. What that also does is define the validity of experience by location. The emphasis is on place not on what is studied there; the significance of the academic is minimised in the seductive images of

exotica. The call for programme growth in non-traditional locations is not based on solid academic grounds but on a shallow pursuit of the new. The unanswerable fact is that there is no huge demand for a radical increase in programmes in many of those locations. The reality is that student demand remains predominantly for programmes in Western Europe.

In this context students know more than their advisers and choose more wisely based, arguably, on what makes most academic sense and what relates most to the home curriculum of US universities. The curriculum of the vast majority of US universities is drawn from the Western European intellectual tradition. Study abroad in Europe relates most consistently to relevant academic environments in the USA. The demand for growth of programmes in non-traditional locations is not student led, nor does it reflect an increasing demand for genuine intellectual exploration. It is led by some of the leadership in the field who have lost sight of academic credibility and student interest in a thoughtless pursuit of the new.

Another rationale frequently cited for non-traditionalism is that it is in the USA's political interest to learn more about "world regions that are critical to U.S. national security."¹ There certainly is a strong political case for this but the argument also has implications: It advances an educational policy in terms only of US political interest. Rather than focus on the mutual benefits that accrue from contact between young people of different cultures, the argument frames itself in terms of a single political perspective. This may be a valid tactic to extract funding from reluctant governments but it is not the

language of true educational discourse. International education should not be seen as a tool of a single national interest.

The call for a large increase in study in non-traditional location is unrealistic on a number of other fronts – not least capacity. There are issues related to the impact of US students on host communities. The existence (or otherwise) of a sufficient infrastructure is an obvious factor. US study abroad students are highly demanding of both human and physical resources and, in a limited resource environment, the local students may well feel resentful at the diversion of those towards one particular national group.

In my own experience at The University of Cape Town, the international office struggled with the reality that there were, in practice, two groups of international students. By far the largest came from within Africa. As one of the leading institutions in sub-Saharan African, the University of Cape Town attracted students from across the continent. There was also a substantial group of US study abroad students. The US students had paid for, and expected, a level of student service way beyond that offered to the other international students on campus (let alone the national students). While this reality was not always a source of tension, it did establish a communication barrier and the situation contained within itself real potential for resentment and ill feeling. The demands of the study abroad minority may be more than the host universities can, and should, bear.

Economic benefits to the host university in terms of fees paid should be seen in the context of cultural cost. An increase in US study abroad programmes in the developing

world will bring some unreliable economic benefits given the volatility of the market. It may also have an impact on the local students that could be much more ambiguous. The US students may well be perceived as using up an unequal share of available resources. Their presence in classes may well be a mixed blessing (liberal – theological dichotomy). Power relationships (based on inequitable wealth) are, in particular, a significant barrier to communication. Inevitably local students are unable to participate in the life that US students take for granted. They may well feel like poor relations (which, indeed, they are).

In short, non-traditionalism is not driven by real academic need; it is driven by an unholy trinity of national political interest, the pursuit of the exotic and a missionary tendency.

There are real and creditable reasons for wanting to expand education abroad beyond the traditional locations but these are not articulated in the current orthodoxy. The growth of programmes in the developing world should be driven by a combination of curriculum development on US campuses with an investment in building infrastructure in universities in those regions. This would create an academic rationale for the expansion and a development that serves the mutual interest of higher education across the world. This is quite simply not happening.

3. Inflation:

Finally, some thoughts on the rhetoric of our work and what I think of as the inflationary tendency. I want briefly to consider two statements: “Study abroad changed my life” and “global citizenship.”

We tend to celebrate the speaker who asserts that “study abroad changed my life.” The speaker is usually enlightened and talented, and they may also define themselves as a “global citizen”. This is, of course, welcome rhetoric. It validates our field and makes us feel effective.

The statement is, nevertheless, problematic not for what it says about an individual but for what it implies for our work and for the burdens it imposes upon our students.

The statement implicitly asserts the primacy of self. The self is the consumer and abroad is the commodity to be consumed. Consumption will lead to transformation. The commodification and commercialisation of education across the globe may well be inevitable and irresistible. That said, we can seek to mitigate the worst manifestations.

Students going abroad for education have not bought a product guaranteed to meet their needs, nor have they bought an experience that will inevitably change their lives.

Studying abroad is not a ride in Disneyland where, in return for buying an admission ticket, participants are guaranteed a thrill. Instead, participants have gained access to an opportunity to grow beyond their own narrow perspective. This is not a bought commodity

but a learned experience: an elusive goal and a process, not a location. The purpose of education abroad is, in short to learn to be more cosmopolitan and, thus, to be a better citizen. The important educational challenge is to empower students to move beyond a purely first-person perspective. The aim is not just to travel in space across national boundaries but also across the hardest boundary of all: that which isolates us from a sense of empathy with the other.

Another problem is that the individual in the statement is the passive recipient of the envisaged life-changing process. Thus, it creates a mythical transformative space called “abroad”. The implied purpose of this space is to make students feel better about themselves. The statement that “study abroad changed my life” masks a potentially complex set of issues. Firstly, it is entirely indiscriminating in implication as if “abroad” were one transforming location wherein the participant will gain insight simply by being there. It consequently minimises (or fails to distinguish between) some crucial matters:

What do you study?

Where do you study it?

How do you study it?

What do you have to do to maximise learning?

At the root of this issue is the massive qualitative difference between saying “study abroad changed my life” and “I changed my life by studying X in Y.” in the active voice. That implies responsibility, effort and engagement. In the first statement the speaker implies a level of passivity. The transformative process results from an experience of

another location. On a literal level, this is misleading in that mere proximity will not ensure change of any kind given that wherever one goes one never escapes the baggage of the self. It also obscures the fact that to gain anything from any form of study the participant needs to be an active researcher not a vessel into which experience is poured. In natural sciences mixing A with B in a test tube will almost certainly create a C. That is not the case in our field. As we are well aware, you can take participant A to location B without any perceptible C emerging. We need to be much more intentional and precise about learning objectives and, in consequence, to moderate claims of quasi -mystic transformation.

Further, by mythologizing the transformative power of this place “abroad”, there is an implicit denigration of the home learning environment that fails to recognise that transformation for any individual is less about location and more about active exploration. In short, it is disrespectful of home society which does not, by implication, have the same power to alter life experience. Wherever you go, you take yourself with you. It is too much to expect a location (of itself) to be transformative.

The statement creates unrealistic, transformative expectations against which many other study abroad experiences are certain to fail. (Compare “changed my life” with “improved my Spanish”). One of the recurrent problems in study abroad is that we exaggerate the claims for what we do by utilizing a huge degree of hyperbole.ⁱⁱ We are burdening ourselves with definitions that, in the end, will come back to bite us.

The concept of the ‘global citizen’ is another intrusive example. The idea is obviously an oxymoron—we are citizens of a country and we are not citizens of the globe: the “globe” is a very fractured and divided place. If we tell students that what we do is educate them to be global citizens by (for example) sending them to Berlin for four weeks or even for a year, we are embedding failure in to the experience. Rather, we should be more realistic and say that the goal of study abroad is to create better educated citizens, and one of the ways to cultivate a better educated citizen is to experience another culture. The idea of learning to be more cosmopolitan (or internationally aware) is a far more realistic and manageable goal: the object is to teach students something about another culture so they can be better citizens of their own.

The status of a “global citizen” is an absolute condition (you either are or are not). In contrast the notion of cosmopolitanism is progressive. It is possible to be more or less cosmopolitan and is, thus, a learned process, not some envisaged state of grace. It is the business of educators not the aspiration of the prophet. In essence, the notion of global citizenship is a form of rhetorical flourish. In contrast, cosmopolitanism leads more readily towards specificity and progressive acquisition.

The notion of a “global citizen” is, however, not without meaning. As a metaphor, it forefronts and prioritises the cosmopolitan over the parochial. In that sense, it is aspirational; a moral rather than a legal condition that asserts the interdependence of humanity.

On the other hand, it may also signal the development of a new privileged and empowered class: those who have access to technology and travel are this new global elite. The global citizen is a member of a new ruling class empowered by access to electricity (thus, technology), comparative wealth (thus, education and mobility), and other accoutrements of privilege. It is this group (including us) who now, in Marxist terms, own the means of production. In this sense, “global citizenship” is not a moral aspiration but an economic condition.

The use of the term global citizen needs, therefore, to be nuanced and not used as a glib marketing claim in study abroad. It is a complex, contested proposition and not a condition to be achieved through the purchase of experience. On the one hand, it signals an aspirational, even utopian, view of the world. On the other, it identifies a powerful elite: a new emergent trans-national upper class from which much of the world is significantly distanced, above all, through poverty.

4. Conclusion

The problems identified here derive, then, from a combination of over-simplification, obfuscation and exaggeration. They burden the field of education abroad with aspirations that can rarely be met, and with notions that, at best, lack intellectual coherence and, at worst, create obscure fields of jumbled discourse.

In short, the object of this presentation has been to ask ourselves to explore our agenda with the kind of vigour that we apply to other educational activities. We need to view variable models, trends, developments, locations and rhetorical devices through the lens of the educator not the travel agent or (God forbid) the prophet or the producer of consumer goods. We are in a serious profession. If we want to be taken more seriously, we have to start thinking more seriously.

Furthermore, as we are all sadly aware, US universities operate in a litigious environment and are subject to many burdensome legal requirements. An institutional attraction to the independent programme is, broadly, that the US University can apply its own quality control mechanisms and avoid an uneven provision of welfare. They can, therefore, be sure that their exported standards meet US legal requirements (which are, inevitably, different from those in much of Europe).

It is not only students who are precluded from valid education abroad by the principle of immersion. The fully integrated programme creates fewer opportunities for faculty development or for a sense of faculty ownership. The independent programme offers faculty opportunities to visit, teach or research. It, thus, facilitates student participation in study abroad as US faculty become enthusiastic recruiters on their home campuses. In a direct way they also have an enhanced sense of programme ownership and an extended international experience. The integrated programme model allows for little or no faculty development.

ⁱ <http://nsep.aed.org/boren>

ⁱⁱ “My semester abroad taught me that there is a vast discrepancy between the rhetoric of international education and the reality of what many students like myself experience while abroad.” Zemach-Bersin, Op.Cit.